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AUTHOR Van Deusen-Henkel, Jenifer
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ABSTRACT

This discussion of kindergarten education is intended to provide information that educators can use in their efforts to provide equal access to an excellent education for all children. Current and past approaches to kindergarten are delineated in discussions of changes in the nature of schooling, in society, and in the understanding of how children learn. Subsequent discussion envisions an exemplary kindergarten of the future that is both equitable and excellent. (RH)

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EQUAL ACCESS: SCHOOL ENTRANCE AS AN EQUITY ISSUE

Jenifer Van Deusen-Henkel
Maine Department of Educational & Cultural Services

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INTRODUCTION

It is a typical morning in a typical kindergarten in a typical American town. Children of all sizes, shapes and colors are hanging up their coats and finding something to do before the bell rings. Jane and Tru Mai are building with blocks while Willy serves Julio "breakfast" in the housekeeping area. Sam sobs quietly in the corner, as he does every morning when his mother leaves. At her desk, Molly is engrossed in reading the story she has just written for her father's birthday. The morning bell rings; the children put away their toys and file to their seats. As she calls the roll for her class, Ms. Smith registers her daily amazement at the diversity and developmental range of the twenty-five children in her group. She suppresses a wave of the now-familiar rising panic, and wonders how much of the curriculum she will be able to cover today.

This scenario is repeated daily in kindergartens across our country. Are all these children "ready" for school? Is the school "ready" for all these children? How can schools provide "equal access" to an excellent education for all children from the very beginning?

School curriculums usually embody the values, beliefs and expectations of the advantaged social class and therefore put children from different backgrounds at risk of early school failure. "Disadvantaged" can mean more than poor. Inflexible curricula and rigid programs discriminate against children because of their age, learning style, gender, ethnic or socioeconomic background. In order to understand more about the problem, we need to examine the kindergarten present-day curriculum and the factors that act as

obstacles to schools providing equal access. Then we must consider alternatives to overcoming those obstacles.

THE KINDERGARTEN OF YESTERDAY AND TODAY

In most states the sole criterion for school entrance is chronological age. Statutes specifying the age for entrance to kindergarten and first grade exist in all fifty states, and the majority of states have detailed entrance requirements and procedures (Wolf and Kessler, 1987). These laws and regulations spell out the legal right of all children to a free public education. What they do not specify are ways to provide all these children with a quality education. The interplay of a variety of forces raises questions of how to guarantee equity in our schools. In order to understand this situation more fully, we must consider issues such as changes in the nature of schooling, changes in our society and changes in our understanding of how young children learn.

Changes in the Nature of Schooling

During the last two decades the kindergarten curriculum has undergone radical change. Originally, this "garden for children" was conceived as a place to nurture young children, and to help them make the transition from home to school. "Creative self-activity" was emphasized in the Froebelian philosophy, with children free to choose from a variety of interesting and useful activities. Children were not expected to sit still and listen for long periods; storytelling and music were the only large-group, teacher-directed activities (Egerston, 1987). Whether or not children could count or recite the alphabet was irrelevant, since they were expected to learn those things later in

school. This approach basically "matched" the levels of social, physical, emotional and intellectual development of the young child.

Today's kindergarten program has a more formal orientation, and reflects academic expectations previously demanded of children at least one (if not two) years older. Kindergarten children are often expected to master "basic skills" such as reading and arithmetic formerly reserved for introduction in first grade. Seatwork and teacher-directed instruction have replaced the play and child-initiated activities of the past.

This is commonly referred to as the "pushed-down" curriculum, because of the "domino effect" created by increased emphasis on performance standards for high school graduation. The high school has told the middle school what students need to "be ready" for high school. In turn, the middle school tells the elementary school what students need to "be ready" for middle school, and the elementary school tells the kindergarten what students need to "be ready" for first grade. The kindergarten bears the brunt of all this pressure from the school community. One result of the "pushed-down" curriculum is the so-called "greying of the kindergarten" (Egerston, 1987). Increased pressure on children to perform has convinced many parents to keep their age-eligible child home another year. Although some research indicates that older children do better in school than do younger students in the same group (Gilmore, 1984 and Huff, 1984, in Uphoff and Gilmore, 1985), the data is relative. It is obvious that using chronological age as the entrance criterion will inevitably yield a group of children in which some are older than others, and that the older ones will be able to do more than their younger counterparts.

The performance of these older children perpetuates the notion that older is better and that the curriculum really is appropriate. Eligible five year olds now look very young, and are often quietly but firmly discouraged from taking advantage of their legal right.

Unfortunately, the skills and abilities that the children have already developed are largely ignored, and they are expected to fit a predetermined set of criteria. If they cannot perform in certain ways, although they are of legal entrance age, they are considered to be "not ready" for school. Due to their slower rates of initial development, boys are more often considered "not ready" for the demands of kindergarten (Soderman & Phillips, 1987). Kindergarten teachers also give important weight to a child's age in making retention decisions (Shepard and Smith, 1985); that is, they are more likely to retain a young child than they are an older child whose skills are equally lacking.

Changes in Society

One cause of this "pushed-down" curriculum is a shift in how society views the young child. Demographic changes have ushered more women into the workforce and essentially destroyed the myth of the nuclear family. As a result, our society no longer sees children as helpless, "sensuous" (Elkind, 1987) beings who need to be totally supported and nurtured. We now have the concept of the "competent" child, who, due to electronic stimulation and access to the world at large, is able to perform amazing feats heretofore unseen in the educational arena. Hence the "superbaby" phenomeon, where infants are "taught" to read (Elkind, 1987). In the public school setting, this shift has

encouraged parents to discard the play-based kindergarten curriculum and demand worksheets and basal readers. As a society we are also experiencing an influx of immigrants from other countries and a rise in the birth rates in our own minority population (Hodgkinson, 1987) The discrepancy between the curriculum planned by and for the dominant culture and the needs and desires of minorities becomes ever more apparent as the faces of our nation change. Children retained at grade level are "disproportionately from minority and low economic groups" (Goodlad, in Reeves, 1988), because curriculum and school practices are rooted in the mainstream culture, and do not use cultural knowledge to build a bridge between home and school (Hu-Pei-Au, 1980; Heath, 1983).

Changes in Our Understanding of How Children Learn

In the past, we viewed children as blank slates, on which knowledge was to be inscribed, or empty vessels into which knowledge could be poured. In recent years, an understanding of how learning occurs has grown much more sophisticated. We now know that young children learn by doing, that learning is the result of the complex interaction between children's experiences in the world and their own thinking (Piaget, 1972; Montessori, 1964; Erikson, 1940; Elkind, 1986; Kamii, 1985). Cognitive psychology is extending this idea with schema theory, which sees learning as "an active and constructive process, in which the (learner) is constantly reviewing what is known, linking new information to prior knowledge, forming and testing hypotheses...and revising concepts and ideas as new information is acquired" (Jones, 1986, p. 7).

Play is not merely a diversion for the young child, it is the means through which the above schema are developed and revised. Through play, children construct their own realities and begin to make sense of the world (Smilansky, 1968; Vygotsky, 1962). We also believe that children's growth and development occur in an integrated fashion; that is, that development in one dimension (cognitive, for example) is influenced by development in other dimensions (social, emotional and physical) (Bredekamp, 1987).

Recent studies on intelligence also have implications for early elementary education. Traditionally, intelligence has been defined as the ability to adapt well to the "language-oriented abstractions" (Goodlad, in Reeves, 1988) predominant in our schools. To be verbal was to be able. Children whose learning styles favored the verbal mode did well in school. Children whose talents were in other areas, including the artistically and spatially gifted, either found little to validate their skills and talents or "experienced outright repression" (Goodlad, in Reeves, 1988). Theories about the validity of multiple intelligences are now being advanced and explored, by cognitive psychologists such as Howard Gardner. These theories propose that human intelligence takes on not one, but many, forms, each valuable and worthy of attention and development.

THE KINDERGARTEN OF TOMORROW: EQUITABLE AND EXCELLENT

I do not advocate a return to the seemingly idyllic "child's garden" as described by Froebel over a century ago. The nostalgic desire to recapture the image of a time when life was simpler and children could be children obscures the historical grim realities of that time -

child labor, hunger and poverty. This nostalgia discounts our recent discoveries about children and learning. What I propose instead is to synthesize what we have learned from the past with what we know of the present into a vision for the future.

The kindergarten of tomorrow cannot be seen in isolation. It needs to be viewed within the context of the total restructuring of schools. It is not enough to ensure equitable, excellent kindergarten programs only to have children hit the wall of inequitable treatment at first grade. Schools must re-examine their missions, structure and practices in the light of familial and societal change and adjust to meet the new demands.

The community school is a concept whose time has come. The work of James Comer at Yale shows clearly the power of opening the school as a center for community involvement in learning. Intensive collaboration of parents, administrators, teachers and support staff, aided by a team of mental health practioners, not only raised achievement levels of the students but also inspired many parents to further their own education. This approach also provides a means for equalizing what James Coleman from the University of Chicago calls the "social capital" which is the birthright of most middle class children that has been reduced by societal changes (Reeves, 1988). "Social capital" refers to the resources available for "nurturance, mentoring, personal attention and intimacy" (Reeves, 1988, p. 19).

In addition, the business sector is an important factor in the community school equation. It must be an equal partner with parents, community members and educators in the work of designing new programs

to meet the emerging needs of the tomorrow's citizens. The business sector is aware that today's students are tomorrow's workforce, and that the information age demands a new type of worker. Perpetuating the existence of an educational underclass threatens our ability as a nation to compete in the global marketplace (A Nation At Risk, 1983). It also imperils the basis of our democratic society, which rests on a citizenry literate enough to make informed choices (Children in Need", 1987). The business sector is ready to participate in a partnership with schools to help students learn how to learn.

How can we connect this rhetoric with the reality of what is needed for equitable and excellent schools for young children? Early childhood educators must move swiftly in ensuring that their existing programs are as unbiased and meaningful as possible to the children they serve. This can be done by forming a "community of learners" within the school (and with parents and community members), the purpose of which is to learn as much as possible about programs for young children, and how to put those into place. Then, other sweeping changes need to be planned and implemented.

First, the kindergarten should become absorbed as a part of a comprehensive early childhood program that may include preschool and child care programs, nutrition and health services and parent education and involvement. Services to parents and the community for early childhood development, education and care should be available, (ideally), from before conception -- such as classes in sexuality and parenting as part of the adolescent's comprehensive health curriculum.

Secondly, the actual early childhood program should be planned with careful attention to quality. They should include the following components identified for effective programs for young children:

* A low teacher/ pupil ratio;
* Careful planning of program outcomes, with daily objectives and activities keyed to attaining these outcomes;
* Rigorous training in early childhood development and education and family systems for all staff (teachers, assistants and administrators);
* Strong collaboration with parents, recognizing that parents are equal partners with schools in education and care; and,
* Sensitivity and responsiveness to the whole child, including health and nutritional needs. (Natriello, Pallas & McDill, in Children in Need, 1987)

Additionally, the early childhood program should not be an island unto itself, but should be fully integrated into the school community. Ideally, the program would be ungraded (Goodlad, 1987; Elkind, 1986), with opportunities for continuous progress. Interage tutoring and learning opportunities, particularly in cooperative groups, would enhance the learning and social development of all the learners involved (Johnson & Johnson, 1975), as well as validating the learning styles of the cultures represented. Grouping for instruction would be done on the basis of need and would be re-assessed constantly, with teachers following the principles for effective teaching in all their encounters with students.

Curriculum planning should be based on what we know about how young children learn, and on knowledge of the range of intelligences and learning styles present in any group. Stressing the delivery of "basic skills" in a mechanical, formally academic setting robs learning of its excitement for young children, and creates the joyless school atmosphere that further discriminates against those at risk for school failure (Levin, 1985). Provision for children to dance or sing or build to express or enhance their understandings should be as important as the traditional verbal activities. Young children should also be encouraged to develop their thinking skills in contexts which respect and support their cultures of origin.

Recent curriculum developments build on how children learn and validate them as learners. High expectations for student learning can be maintained, with the emphasis placed correctly on learning to think and learn through activities that are developmentally appropriate. The "whole language" approach to reading and writing puts language and thinking at the center of the school program and encourages children to find and communicate their own meaning as they learn authentically (Goodman et al, 1987). "Mathematics Their Way" (Barrata-Lorton, 1976) is an experiential approach to the development of math concepts and understanding of operations, rooted in the knowledge that learning occurs by moving from the concrete to the abstract and back again. Science approaches like the "ESS" programs help children discover the natural world as they learn the processes of inquiry and hypothesis. Access to technology such as computers and video help children to extend their understanding of systems and the world and empower them through the use of adult tools. Multicultural awareness infused into

all activities encourages self-esteem while promoting a broad perspective on the world. These approaches can be implemented through thematic-based untis and/or through classroom learning centers, which allow for student choice and movement. Student should contribute to their design and implementation, as well as into the regulation and operation of the school. In this way students will come to take charge of their own learning and begin to learn about democracy in action.

Approaches such as these are the bases for the early childhood program of tomorrow. Vital to the success of such programs are parental and community understanding, support and involvement in planning and implementation. Educators can no longer simply pay lip service to parent involvement: creating the schools that welcome and teach all students will take all of our energy and creativity. Only when we all work together will we be able to create schools that are equitable and excellent for all of our children.

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